



An EOD technician in a heavy bomb suit gets a last-minute check from another technician before moving in to take a closer look at an improvised explosive device.

# THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Story by SGT Sharon McBride  
Photos by Heike Hasenauer



Learning to use robots to locate, observe and in some cases neutralize explosive devices is one aspect of the EOD technicians' training. Students spend 24 weeks in Phase 1 training and a further 26 days in Phase 2 schooling.

**S**WEAT pours off the explosive ordnance disposal technician's face as he looks down at a bomb that's set to go off within moments. He quickly decides what to do, and within seconds renders the bomb harmless.

For soldiers who perform one of the most dangerous jobs in the Army — neutralizing bombs and other explosive devices — making a quick and correct decision can mean the difference between life and death.

"You have to know what you're doing," said MSG Kent Hamann, an EOD technician since 1984. "You've got to be focused." And, unlike the heroes depicted in movies, who sweat "buckets" before snipping a wire that miraculously turns out to be the right one, "we have to know which one to snip, because there could be a time when we have to make that decision."

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## EOD: Life & Death Difference



During a break in a field training exercise, EOD soldiers study an X-ray taken of a mock unexploded aerial bomb discovered nearby.

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EOD, the 55D military occupational specialty, doesn't draw large numbers of recruits, but it's vitally important to the Army. Besides rendering improvised explosive devices safe, EOD technicians also eliminate unexploded ordnance in operational areas and on military installations. All soldiers who enter EOD training volunteer for the job. Lately, the number of applicants has dwindled.

Soldiers who do enter the career field undergo extensive training, Hamann said. Many EOD soldiers spend over a year in school. The first specialized training in the MOS, conducted at Redstone Arsenal, Ala., begins after a soldier has completed basic training.

The 10 weeks of introductory courses focus on what it takes to be an EOD technician. Next, students travel to Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., for 24 weeks of Phase 1 training. Then it's back to Redstone Arsenal for 26 days of Phase 2 training.

Besides learning how to handle bombs and unexploded ordnance, the prospective EOD technicians also learn about hazardous materials, waste transportation and management, proper wear of protective suits, how to use EOD robots and, finally, how to support the U.S. Secret Service and State Department in their protection of high-ranking officials.

"I've traveled to places I never thought I would, like Somalia and

Kuwait, to protect high-level officials," Hamann said. "This MOS requires a lot of travel. And there's no telling where you'll end up from day to day."

Travel is actually one of the perks of the job, he said. "But as an EOD soldier, you never know what's going to be waiting at your destination.

"You've got to want to put your life on the line," Hamann continued. "One day you could walk into an impact area with unexploded ordnance or a place where you have to disconnect the timing device on a bomb. You generally can't plan out your week. You've got to be ready to go at a



An EOD robot heads out for a look at a reported bomb. Such robots allow technicians to closely examine explosive devices without endangering themselves.



**A soldier prepares to X-ray a simulated explosive device during a training exercise. X-rays can reveal a real device's contents and inner structure, and allow the EOD tech to spot possible booby traps.**

moment's notice."

Many of the soldiers attracted to the profession are drawn to its inherent excitement, Hamann said. "There's nothing mundane about the work."

But the job's impact on family life can be a drawback, as is the case for most deployable soldiers, Hamann said. Family and friends have to understand that the job comes first. "I've had to call my wife and tell her, 'I'm going on an incident mission and I'll call you when I get back.'"

When he's out on a job, loved ones worry, much as they would if he were on the front line in combat, he said. "When I go out, there's always the chance I won't come back."

So why does anyone want to enter so dangerous a profession? "For most

EOD technicians, it comes down to honor and a sense of duty," Hamann said. That's equally true for those who have been on the job many years, as well as for young soldiers who are moving up in the ranks.

"I wanted a job where I could help the public," said PV2 David Smith soon after entering the first phase of EOD training at Redstone Arsenal.

"I love life," Smith said. "So doing this sometimes makes me nervous. But as my training continues, my skills will increase. Other soldiers do this. I know I can, too."

The "old-timers" include people like 15-year EOD veteran SFC Ken Thompson.

"You can't put your finger on the character traits required to be an EOD

technician," Thompson said. "We all blend so well together. We work well together, no matter what. I could be fighting mad at one of my fellow NCOs, but I have to be able to set that aside while on a mission."

While EOD soldiers draw hazardous-duty pay, they don't typically enter the MOS for the extra money, Thompson said. "You can make more money cleaning up unexploded ordnance and disarming bombs in the civilian sector. It's about duty and honor, not fame and glory. I've seen what people can do to other people. I've seen a kid blown up. This is what I can do to keep things like that from happening."

EOD soldiers often help foreign countries clear the minefields that get

left behind after the fighting stops.

"I've been in EOD for 21 years, and in the Army for 25 years," said SGM Jack Dempsey. "I think it's the best job in the Army. Every day is different. I've cleared mine fields in Africa, and I've taught basic EOD procedures to soldiers in foreign armies."

The EOD ranks currently include fewer than 1,000 soldiers. Of those, some 25 are women.

"Not many women make it through the training," said SPC Elaine Corales as she embarked on the first phase of training. "I want to do this because the work will be challenging and interesting," said the former South Carolina high school teacher.

Those who make the cut can consider themselves "a cut above," school officials said. The attrition rate for the MOS is very high, 42.2 percent last year, Hamann said. □



A technician works to defuse a simulated land mine during an exercise. Mine field clearance is an important aspect of the job for EOD units.



SFC Tony Hammerquist of the 710th Ordnance Company carries an unexploded rocket round found a few hundred yards from the gate of Kandahar Airport.

# EOD in Afghanistan

Story by SPC David Marck  
Photos by SPC George Allen

**A**FTER more than 20 years of war, the Afghan countryside is littered with unexploded mortar rounds, bombs, rockets, land mines and thousands of rounds of ammunition — some never fired, some duds.

The 710th Ordnance Company, an active Army unit out of Port Loma, a Navy base in San Diego, Calif., is tasked with the critical job of clearing these sites. The 710th is also the only active-duty Army unit in the San Diego area, which is home to many Navy and Marine units.

Some Canadian army EOD specialists are working with the 710th, so the clearing of munitions is a coalition effort.

SPC David Marck and SPC George Allen are assigned to the 314th Press Camp Headquarters in Afghanistan.

The locations of munitions caches, unexploded ordnance and land mines are reported to the 710th daily by roving patrols and Afghan nationals.

"We start with a list of locations where somebody reported seeing something," said SFC Tony Hammerquist, the 710th's operations NCO. "It could be one land mine or a cache of howitzer shells. What we have to do is check all of the sightings, determine what's there and then decide on the best way to take care of it."

"The first assessment is down and dirty," said SSG Grant Adkins, an EOD team leader. "We have to assess what's most important before we do anything."

"We're looking for anything that poses a direct threat to coalition forces. Our top priority is any kind of shoulder-fired missile," said Hammerquist, who has been working in EOD for 12 years. "After that we're looking for grenades and mines — anything that can be easily redeployed against our troops."

The EOD teams often don't find anything at the sites.

Most of the ordnance was left over from the Soviet Union's 10-year war in Afghanistan. "But the locals will just pick things up and move them," Hammerquist said, "or the ordnance could be picked up by anti-Taliban forces for their use."

"Often we just find large dirt mounds," Adkins said. "We usually find the caches buried under the mounds, but we often don't know what we're going to find, and that's the scary part."

Once they decide that the cache poses a threat and needs to be de-

stroyed, the team decides how best to do it.

"If it's safe to move, we'll just pick it up and carry it to the location of a larger cache so we can blow it all together," said Hammerquist. "If it's too dangerous, we'll just blow it in place."

EOD detonations are a common sound around the airfield. Sometimes the explosions are so strong that they rattle the windows in the airport terminal, despite the fact that the ordnance is being detonated several miles outside the airport's perimeter, Hammerquist said.

"We've been here since Jan. 23," said 1LT Kevin Wynes, commander of the 710th. "We've done detonations almost every day. We could never get rid of all the stuff that's out here. That's why we have to prioritize."

Besides the standard weapons and munitions caches, the EOD teams also find other unexploded ordnance.

"Occasionally we'll run across a minefield," said Adkins. "We mark our tracks to keep people from going in there. We also mark the location on the map and send the information up the chain of command."

The rest, he said, is the job of the

combat engineers. While EOD has the resources and expertise to take care of the caches and single explosives, they don't have the manpower to handle an entire minefield.

EOD also takes care of any unexploded ordnance that coalition forces may have placed in the area that hasn't been destroyed.

About the size of a soft drink can and painted a bright yellow, BLU-97 cluster bombs were used by the Air Force in the early stages of the war. Released in canisters, each contained

over 200 of the explosives that drifted to the ground on parachutes and detonated on impact. Unfortunately, a small percentage didn't explode.

"They're too sensitive to move," Hammerquist said. "Just settling in the sand or being blown about by a strong gust of wind can set them off." In order to destroy them, an EOD team builds a fighting position on top of a vehicle, and a sharpshooter wearing body armor uses a .50-caliber

sniper rifle to detonate the canisters.

"Our job is dangerous," said Hammerquist, "but it's what we do. It's a lot like an airborne operation. It's risky, but if everyone does what they're trained to do, everyone comes out alive." □



**As SSG Grant Adkins (left) and a local Afghan look on, Canadian army Sgt. Kory Fisher looks through a reference manual to identify a land mine discovered near a coalition position.**